

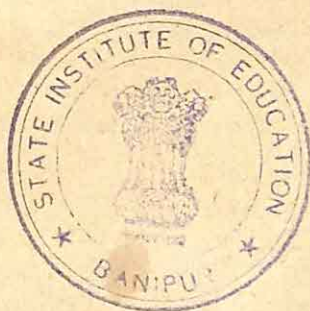
SOCIAL CHANGE
IN INDIA
SINCE INDEPENDENCE

PUBLICATIONS DIVISION



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IN INDIA
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INTRODUCTION

A remarkable social transformation has been taking place in India since Independence. Comprehensive and far-reaching, it has affected most spheres of social life, urban as well as rural, and covered all strata of society from the commoner to the prince. So sweeping is the change that hardly any social custom, tradition, institution, belief or value has escaped its influence; and so obvious that no observer can fail to be struck by it. The wind of change has swept away many cobwebs of superstition and social prejudice and broken rigid caste and class barriers. Whether one looks at education, public health, the status of women, or the condition of labour, of the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes or any other social group, the effect of change is unmistakable. Indeed, change is writ large over the entire Indian social scene.

Not all the changes that have come about are the result of a free play of social forces. Quite a number of the important social changes are due to recent legislation. These have been brought about through the adoption by the Government of socio-economic measures, some of which are ahead of the thinking of the people. Many of these have yet to win broad social approval and acceptance. Other factors, such as the country's partition, the integration of princely states, the implementation of development plans, and the growing inroads of science and technology into India's life, undoubtedly had their own impact on the social structure.

These changes have been detailed in the succeeding pages.

THE FIRST JOLT

Indian society experienced a severe shake-up with the arrival in the country, in the wake of the partition, of millions of displaced persons from East and West Pakistan. The problems

that this influx posed were stupendous. Inflamed passions had to be soothed; peace between communities at loggerheads had to be kept. Food and clothing, housing, educational facilities, essential social services and means of livelihood—all had to be provided to the immigrants immediately even though the life of the indigenous population itself had been disrupted by migration in the reverse direction and the British withdrawal. The entirely unprecedented situation called for many new approaches, many improvisations and even new values. All this put a severe strain on the social frame which, in the process of adjustment, underwent many changes.

Intimate contact with the displaced population from West Pakistan (a more vigorous and less inhibited group on the whole) led to the modification or abandonment of outworn practices, age-old customs and petty prejudices which had petrified in our settled milieu. The even tenor of social life was disturbed and the wonted resistance to change broke down. This prepared the society mentally for more radical social changes which were to follow.

ADOPTION OF NEW CONSTITUTION

On January 26, 1950, the republican Constitution of India came into force. This epoch-making document indicated that sovereign democratic India had adopted a Welfare State as its goal. Making a striking departure from the State's pre-Independence unconcern for other than merely administrative functions, it pledged the State to strive for "a social order in which justice, social, economic and political, shall inform all the institutions of the national life". It provided for universal suffrage. India under the British had known only a very selective franchise, and even that for less than four decades, while the Indian princely states had almost totally denied franchise to half a hundred million persons. The Constitution, promulgated in 1950, embraced prince and plebeian alike; it provided for a re-integrated nation and conferred equal social, economic and political rights on all citizens regardless of sex, religion or caste. It guaranteed to all citizens

the right to freedom of speech and expression, association, movement and profession, and humane conditions of work for the worker. Untouchability, an age-old curse, was abolished. All citizens became equal in the eyes of law and of the State, and were given the right to equality of opportunity to make good in life, to own property and be appointed to any office of the State.

The Constitution also directed the State to provide for free and compulsory education of all children up to the age of 14, to promote the educational and economic interests of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other weaker sections, to so secure the distribution of ownership and control of material resources of the community as to subserve the common good, and to operate the economic system in such a manner as will avoid concentration of wealth and means of production to the detriment of the common man. Implementation of the provisions of this comprehensive charter of human rights inevitably required radical changes in the country's social and economic set-up. Steps continue to be progressively taken to effect them.

ABOLITION OF ZAMINDARI

A revolution has been brought about in rural Indian society by the introduction of land reforms. To uplift the rural poor, the antiquated feudal institutions of Jagirdari and Zamindari have been abolished in varying degrees by different States through legislative enactments. Now most of the land belongs to its tillers. A Zamindar is allowed to retain proprietary rights only in the land which he tills, subject to a ceiling which differs from State to State. The ownership of the rest of the Zamindari lands has been transferred to the State against reasonable compensation. So far, 20 million tenants have been freed from all obligations to the Zamindars, to whom most of them used to be perpetually indebted. They enjoy tenancy rights so long as they pay the prescribed land revenue to the State. Distribution of cultivable waste lands among landless agriculturists has served to convert their status from one of

insecure, stake-less wage-earners to that of tillers of their own lands. The era of an idle landed aristocracy and the peasants' virtual serfdom has thus come to an end.

BHOODAN YAJNA

Akin to this change, there has been another remarkable development—the birth of a unique movement called the Bhoodan Yajna inspired and organised by Acharya Vinoba Bhave, one of Gandhiji's most trusted disciples.

Landlords were requested to make voluntary donations of their surplus agricultural lands to a common pool for the benefit of the landless peasantry. The movement has attracted a good response. Moving from village to village on foot, Shri Vinoba Bhave has collected about four million acres of agricultural land, about half of which has already been distributed among landless agriculturists. As sequels to this movement, there have sprung up the Gramdan, the Shramdan, the Sampattidan and the Jeevandan movements under which many people all over the country have made donations of whole villages, physical labour, property, including cash, and even expressly dedicated their lives to the service of the rural poor.

INTEGRATION OF PRINCELY STATES

The most radical socio-political change that occurred after Independence was the disappearance of the princely order and the integration of 552 princely states with the rest of the country. The princes renounced their ruling rights in favour of the Indian Union, and the Union Government agreed to give them specified annual amounts as privy purses. The implications of this change were far-reaching. Almost overnight, Princes, Maharajas and Nawabs became ordinary citizens like their erstwhile subjects, who, like their brethren in the rest of the country, acquired the right to live under the rule of law and the government of their own creation.

BETTER DEAL FOR WOMEN

The laws of marriage and inheritance pertaining to the Hindus (which term, in this context, includes Buddhists, Sikhs and Jains and covers more than 85 per cent of India's population) have undergone radical changes, as a result of which the social status of women has improved immensely.

Before the passage of the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, a Hindu marriage was considered to be an indissoluble sacramental union and a Hindu male could have as many wives as he wished. The Act placed both sexes on an equal footing by making monogamy the rule. And the marriage is no longer indissoluble and can be annulled by a court of law. Either party can seek judicial separation or divorce on valid grounds after the expiry of three years from the date of marriage. If a legal divorce takes place, the wife is entitled to maintenance for life.

According to the Special Marriage Act, 1954, any two unmarried persons, irrespective of the religion professed by either of them, can get married by registering themselves with the Registrar of Marriages provided the male is at least 21 and the female 18, and the parties are not within the prohibited degrees of relationship. The Act also provides for divorce by mutual consent if the parties have lived separately for one year and provided three years have elapsed since the date of marriage. Besides dispensing with elaborate marriage ritual the provisions of this Act have paved the way for the breakdown of old barriers in the way of national unity by facilitating marriages between boys and girls of differing castes, creeds, communities, religions and races.

DOWRY

Giving of dowry has long been a source of hardship to people of limited means in Hindu society. The practice has now been curbed by the Prevention of Dowry Act which prescribes fine and imprisonment for both the giver and the taker of dowry beyond a specified amount.

ADOPTION

According to the Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act, 1956, a male Hindu can adopt, or give in adoption, a son or a daughter only with the consent of his wife. Previously this was not the case.

INHERITANCE

The law relating to inheritance and succession has also changed. Before the passage of the Hindu Succession Act, 1956, there were limitations on the capacity of a Hindu woman to hold, dispose of and transmit property. These handicaps have now been removed. Consanguinity and affinity now determine the heirs without any discrimination on the ground of sex. A Hindu woman enjoys the right of full ownership in all property, however acquired. The daughter, the widow and the mother inherit property along with the son and take equal share with him.

CURBING PROSTITUTION

The Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act was enforced in May 1958, and it has succeeded to some extent. Prostitutes are taken to reformatories and helped to rehabilitate themselves as honourable citizens.

INTRODUCTION OF PROHIBITION

Another important change in the social scene is the one brought about by the introduction of prohibition. Although the use of alcohol has never been widespread in India, particular sections of the population addicted to it have been economically vulnerable and needed to have the temptation removed from their midst. Total prohibition now exists in the states of Madras, Maharashtra and Gujarat, in most of Mysore state

and many districts of several other states. In many parts of the country, it is now legally impermissible for a person to drink in public places. Large areas of the country have dry days every week.

NON-STATUTORY CHANGES IN THE STATUS OF WOMEN

Apart from what the law has done to raise the status of women, Indian womanhood has benefited also from a general improvement in the tone of society and the spread of education. Purdah is now more the exception than the rule. There is also a lesser gap than before between the extent of ignorance and superstition among women and that among men. More and more women are entering schools, colleges and universities. The old taboo against higher education for females has died out. Women now occupy some of the highest political offices of the State. There are women among ministers, chief ministers, governors and ambassadors. Many more are college principals, school teachers, air pilots, lady doctors, magistrates, lawyers, nurses, editors, government executives, sales assistants and police constables. They also shine in the field of sports. At least the urban girl is wide awake and fully understands her responsibilities and rights. She is free to marry the man of her choice and choose the profession of her liking. She now feels no hesitation in acting or singing in films or in radio plays—things which would have met with strong social disapproval a decade or two ago.

FACILITIES FOR CHILDREN

Change is also visible in the life of present-day children. They no longer have to play in dirty streets. Parks with swings, seesaws and merry-go-rounds are provided for them in many towns and big villages. A modern child is better fed and has a school within walking distance anywhere in India. Midday free lunches and frequent health checks are becoming increasingly available.

CHANGES IN THE HOME

Social change is also reflected in the Indian home. More people are now consciously averse to living in dirty, dingy and dark houses. The pattern of architecture has undergone modification. Urban residential flats are well-ventilated and fitted with electricity, water taps and flush latrines, all of which were rarities 20 years ago. Similarly, the rural house of today tends to be *pucca*, better ventilated and provided with an in-built toilet.

An important aspect of the change is the revolution that has taken place in the kitchen. More and more families have started using kerosene stoves and pressure cookers. The comparatively less well-to-do families, who cannot afford a heavy fuel bill, have taken to charcoal *angithis*, discarding the use of cow-dung cakes and wood as fuel. In the rural areas, cow-dung gas is being introduced for cooking purposes.

Sewing machines, radio receivers, domestic appliances like electric irons and fans are now to be seen in most, if not all, middle class households. The standard of clothing too has gone up. Soap as an index of prosperity and hygienic consciousness is more in evidence.

In the nature of things, most social changes are noticeable first in the middle classes and later in the lower classes, especially where material improvements are concerned. Similarly, changes travel from the cities to the countryside. But it is a fact of social life in post-Independence India that the poorer people and even the village folk do not now lag far behind the middle classes. Very quickly, every such change is also noticeable in the lower rungs of the social ladder in the cities and in the villages. A peep into the home of an urban labourer's family or even a sweeper's family—supposed to be the poorest of the poor—comes as a pleasant surprise to those who grew up in the old days. In quite a few of these houses, which are built of *pucca* bricks, one finds a radio-set, an electric fan, a bicycle, cots with bedding and, in some of them, even a sewing machine and a transistor radio.

These things could not even be thought of in such homes in pre-Independence days.

The practice of engaging domestic servants is progressively dying out. They can no longer be had for a pittance and have developed a semi-organised trade union character. Part-time helpers have taken the place of domestic servants in most middle class homes.

Costlier too now are the services of barbers, washermen and cobblers. Most of them used to be distinctly lower in status and income to any office-worker; now they earn as much if not more.

REVOLUTION IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

A minor revolution has been brought about in rural society which had long remained bound by the age-old shackles of tradition, apathy and superstition. Before Independence, the peasant used to be poor, illiterate, debt-ridden and at the mercy of the landlord. The picture has now changed. The peasant is now in most cases the owner of the land he tills. He is guided and assisted by the Community Development Programme (which now covers every village in India) in improving agricultural practices, building village roads, tanks and wells, improving his physical and mental health and bettering his standard of living. The Gramsevak is there to act as his constant friend and adviser.

Popularly elected village panchayats have been set up to manage the affairs of the villages, to chalk out programmes of rural development and to decide minor local disputes in a peaceful and just manner without the disputing parties having to resort to costly and ruinous litigation that often bled the litigants white without solving any problem. Community radio sets have been installed in many rural areas to provide instruction and entertainment to the rural people. Adult literacy drives have helped an increasing number of rural people to become literate. Their will to live a better life which lay dormant so far has been

aroused. They are no more forced to resort to the moneylender as the State has given them credit facilities. Villages are being progressively electrified and drinking water facilities improved.

UPLIFT OF THE UNDER-PRIVILEGED

Prior to Independence, people belonging to the Scheduled Castes, specially those engaged in scavenging, flaying and tanning, were considered unclean and therefore unfit for contact. The social disabilities of the *Harijans* (as Gandhiji called the 'untouchables') have now largely been removed. They can freely enter Hindu temples and draw water from the village wells used by the caste Hindus. They enjoy equal social and political rights and their economic condition has been greatly improved. Much of the prejudice against them has disappeared. Untouchability has been abolished by the Untouchability (Offences) Act, 1956, and its practice is a cognizable offence. Members of the Scheduled Castes are among ministers at the Centre and in the States and occupy other high positions in Government. Many are now giving up their traditional occupations and are joining Government offices or taking to other vocations. In fact, they get preference in Government services where a certain quota has been reserved for them. Those who continue to carry on the old occupations now work under improved conditions. Municipal sweepers are supplied with wheel-barrows for carrying garbage. They are also supplied with an improved type of broomstick equipped with a long handle which obviates stooping and enables them to keep their faces away from dust and dirt.

BEGGARY

Factors like natural physical deformity, lack of means of livelihood and a fatalistic or parasitic approach to life drive many persons to mendicancy. This practice used to be sustained in the past by the charitable religious sentiments of the Indian people, causing a permanent economic burden on society. Very often, the profession was hereditary and the problem never-

ending. A born beggar could never understand the dignity of labour and his inclination to work got permanently suppressed. Moreover, the beggar population, which ran into lakhs, also included many professional criminals. Till a decade ago, it was a common sight to find beggars pestering passers-by in a bazaar or a fair for alms.

Begging has now been abolished by law in some of the States. Beggars are rounded up and taken to Homes where they are given gainful work to do. Efforts are being made to wean them away from their old habits by bringing home to them the dignity of work, thus enabling them to lead the life of useful and self-respecting citizens.

JAIL REFORM

Much improvement has been effected in the conditions in jails. The convict is no longer regarded as a sub-human being beyond all hope of redemption and therefore worthy of being subjected only to harsh and inhuman treatment. Instead, the jail authorities now utilise his stay in jail for weaning him away from his criminal tendencies and teaching him some mode of honest labour, so that on the completion of his prison term he can return to society as a useful citizen. For this purpose he is offered lessons in peaceful, disciplined and co-operative living. He is made literate and paid for the work he does. If he shows consistently good behaviour, he is transferred to an open-air jail, given remission in prison term and finally set free as a reformed person. All this has humanised the jail atmosphere.

EMPLOYEES IN SHOPS

Employees in shops and commercial establishments are now less hard-worked and better protected. These establishments are legally prohibited from opening before a certain hour in the morning and remaining open after a certain hour in the evening. Also, every commercial establishment has to remain closed on one day in a week. Incidentally, there is also a change in the

present-day shopping and marketing techniques. Display of goods and home-delivery service are more in vogue. Packing of goods in paper envelopes or plastic bags is also finding greater favour.

SLUM CLEARANCE AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT

A striking feature of social development in the post-Independence era has been the movement for slum clearance and a great spurt in construction activity in urban areas, especially in big cities and Central and State capitals. Some of the slums that existed in big industrial cities have been removed and either modern markets have sprung up or parks have been laid out there. Numerous multi-storeyed buildings have been constructed to house the offices of the Government and private business establishments. Besides, a large number of newly built residential colonies have come up in many cities.

THE WELFARE STATE

Many of the social changes that have come about in our country in recent years are ascribable to the ideals of a Socialist Pattern of Society and a Welfare State and to the Directive Principles of State Policy embodied in the Constitution. State legislation about industrial labour has given the workers higher wages, better working conditions, social security and technical training benefits. Such levies as the wealth tax, gift tax and estate duty are siphoning riches away from the richer sections of society and the money is being utilised for the welfare of the disadvantaged sections, besides meeting the needs of defence and development.

EDUCATION AND HEALTH

The post-Independence era has witnessed a speedy development of the national economy and public services, such as education, health, transport, communications, housing, etc.

To take education first: the Constitution directs the State to provide for free and compulsory education of all children up to the age of 14. There has been a great spurt in the number of primary and middle schools in urban and rural areas and of higher secondary schools, colleges and universities in the cities. An overwhelming majority of Indian children of both sexes in urban areas now go to school and the number of school-going children in the rural areas is also steadily going up. The children of scheduled caste parents are among the main beneficiaries of the primary education programme. An ever-increasing number of boys and girls is utilising educational facilities in the field of higher secondary, college and university education.

In view of the country's requirements of technical personnel in the field of public health, agriculture and engineering, considerable emphasis has been laid on the speedy expansion of technical education facilities. It is now possible for the children and wards of even people of ordinary means to receive higher technical education with the help of numerous Government scholarships if they are good at studies.

Health services too have developed manifold. Since Independence, many big and small hospitals have been started for the benefit of the public and treatment is now easier to get. Malaria, which used to take a heavy toll of life, has been almost completely eradicated. With the provision of wholesome drinking water in towns and villages and mass anti-cholera and anti-smallpox vaccination campaigns, there has been a great improvement in people's health. The mortality rate has declined and the average span of life increased from 27 years to 42 years.

To check the consequent sharp increase in population, family planning and birth control clinics have been started. Raising a large family is no longer considered either inevitable or desirable by many a married couple, and a male child is no longer given that preference over the female child which it used to get

before. This is a development which marks a great advance in social thinking.

TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS

Remarkable changes have also occurred in the field of transport and communications. A network of roads all over the country now connects rural areas to urban centres and is opening up remote parts. Efficient bus services have provided greater mobility to road transport and made road journeys much more comfortable. The scooter and the moped are recent arrivals on our roads, while the bicycle is now a common convenience even in the villages. Fast moving railway trains and special Janata express trains have been introduced on certain routes. Improved rail and road transport services have, besides their economic consequences, also reduced social distance between rural and urban people.

Social change is also in no small measure due to the influence of the radio. It is at once a source of information, instruction and entertainment, and acts as a cementing factor in society by acquainting the listeners of one region with the languages and culture of the people living in other regions. Its value as an instrument of rural "extension" work and social education is now being proved by Indian experience.

URBANISATION

The economic development that has been taking place in the country for the last 16 years too has been responsible for a number of social changes. The construction of dams and fertiliser factories has, by providing increased irrigation and manurial facilities to the agriculturist, helped him to increase agricultural output and thus improve his economic and social condition. Construction of big steel mills, power houses and a host of other huge factories has led to migration of population from different areas to industrial townships. Urban economic development

has caused an exodus of a portion of population from the villages to urban areas where employment opportunities are greater.

EFFECT OF CHINESE INVASION

The Chinese invasion of 1962 made a tremendous impact on Indian economic and social conditions. It unified the country emotionally as never before. The will to sacrifice for the national good was born anew, recalling the spirit of the pre-Independence struggle. Since gold was needed to purchase arms from foreign countries for national defence, money and gold ornaments were donated in heaps to the National Defence Fund. The Gold Control Order was promulgated by Government to check smuggling of gold into the country and to restrict the purchase or sale of, as also the preparation of ornaments from, gold of more than 14 carat fineness. Indian society is still working out the economic and social consequences of this order, such as its effect on form of family savings, design of ornaments, relative outlay on items in dowry, etc.

The massive Pakistani aggression against our country in 1965 led to a further strengthening of national unity and the will to sacrifice. It also engendered a mood of resolute self-reliance among the people.

To the younger generation, born in a free India and liable to take freedom for granted, the ordeal of fire brought home the realization that independence could be preserved only through sacrifice and incessant constructive endeavour.

EMANCIPATION VS. DISCIPLINE

Independence brought many political, economic and social sequelae in its wake. Each one of them has left its mark on Indian society. The net result has been an emancipation of the masses and a liberalization of political and economic objectives of the State,

The two decades since the end of World War II can be said to have marked the beginning of the end of the caste system as a predominant influence in Indian society. These years have seen the fruition of the efforts made in the last century by a succession of reformers to undo the deadening influence of what might have been a useful division of labour in its times, but was now acting only as a drag on national progress. Members of the different castes have long ceased to adhere to their traditional professions. Inter-caste marriages are now much more frequent. Communalism, especially of the fanatical variety, has suffered a setback. Different too is the mode of celebrating festivals. Major festivals are now better organised and culturally oriented, while numerous minor ones seem to enthuse few even among the masses.

These signs of emancipation have sometimes been paralleled by increased self-discipline. Holi, the festival of colour, is now celebrated with less abandon and with more restraint. The development of the queue habit among the people is another example. At bus stands, ticket windows, post offices and many other places one is now likely to find a queue. And not many are prone to break the queue. This testifies to the development, at least in a certain degree, of a sense of social discipline among the people. Attempts are being made through youth festivals, the NCC, the National Discipline Scheme, inter-university competitions and other means to offer constructive and disciplined outlets to the energies of students.

CONCLUSION

All social change involves a withering away of old, outworn codes of behaviour. New codes take time to develop and the interregnum in any society is always a period of ferment, with some people transgressing all codes and few knowing intuitively what is right. How quickly and how consciously new and more suitable codes are developed is the index of a society's health and strength. Realisation and recapitulation of social changes, such as has been attempted in this pamphlet, should serve as an aid in this necessary endeavour.

“Political revolution is important and economic revolution is still more so, but the most important of all is the social revolution in the people.”

—Jawaharlal Nehru

“We have gone through political revolution in this country and become independent. We are going through a process of economic change. There is another aspect which is equally important, and that is social change.....If the political context changes or the economic outlook varies, it follows that the social context also changes, whether you wish it or not. Therefore, a true revolution in a country must take into account all the three aspects together.”

—Jawaharlal Nehru



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